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ABSTRACT

Young children have little difficulty in creating imaginary worlds inhabited by fantastic creatures. Their play often reaches into the realm of make-believe whereby they improvise situations. Playing shop, mother and father, or doctor are examples of children's ability to try out adult roles and behaviors in a safe context. At school, it seems that there is little time given to imaginative play and oral storytelling by children, as the emphasis is on attaining literacy skills. Consequently, the stories children tell at school are largely written. But written stories at this age often lack fluency, vivid descriptions, and enriched vocabulary. Teachers and parents need to remind themselves that they are preparing children for a world that requires both written and oral skills. For children to tell their stories they need strategies that will help them focus on the development of memory and language skills. Some exercises might focus on "storyscapes," which deal with the significant role that setting plays in the telling of stories, especially fairy tales and other tales of the imagination. An examination of the basic elements of setting--mountains, water, towers and castles, woods, forests and trees--is helpful to children in stimulating their imaginations. Exercises and activities on story setting should be given time and space in the classroom. (TB)

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The Road Less Traveled: Storytelling and Imaginative Play

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HUMAN BEINGS HAVE ALWAYS USED story and imagination to shape and order life experiences. From the earliest of times, people have told stories about natural phenomena as a means for giving form and control over these elements. Parents continue to tell their children stories to allay their fears. When I was a small child, I was terrified by thunder. My father told me it was just God and the angels moving the furniture around up in heaven. I only half-believed him, but nevertheless my father's explanation provided some solace and sparked my imagination to such an extent that I began forming my own ideas about what heaven was like, what caused rain (angels perhaps watering the heavenly gardens?) and so on.

Young children have little difficulty in creating imaginary worlds inhabited by fantastic creatures. Their play often reaches into the realm of make-believe whereby they improvise situations. Playing shop, mother and father, or doctor, are examples of children's ability to try out adult roles and behaviors in a safe context. During their make-believe play, children invent new uses for everyday objects. For example, a cardboard box becomes a cash register, pebbles are useful decorations on a mud cake, a broom becomes a spirited stallion. Children quite happily suspend disbelief and engage in the rules of their play. As children become older, this spontaneous play gives way to more structured types of play.

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At school, especially in the higher grades, there appears to be little time given to imaginative play and oral storytelling by children, as the emphasis is on attaining literacy skills. Consequently, the stories children tell at school are largely written. For many children, especially those in the early childhood years, there is a significant gap between the stories they tell and the stories they write. Written stories at this age often lack the fluency, vivid descriptions, and enriched vocabulary that are present in the oral stories. As teachers and parents we need to remind ourselves we are preparing our young learners for a world that is both literate and oral. Story, imagination, and language are essential to our daily lives—in engaging in conversation, in relating to others, in making decisions and exercising choices, and in offering creative solutions to problems.

The emphasis in this article is on children telling stories orally from their imagination. Children's literature, both contemporary and traditional, is the stimulus. Imaginative literature plays a significant role in the lives of many children. While teachers may make use of imaginative literature to develop children as readers and writers, it is also essential to the development of their imagination. The content and form of many of the traditional tales may enable children to respond in imaginative ways. A further extension of these activities could be written versions, but this is not necessary because the oral sharing of stories is a legitimate end in itself.

In order for children to tell their stories, they need strategies that will help them focus on the development of memory and oral language skills. Otherwise, it is too easy just to write the story rather than tell it. Many of the following activities involve children in playing with materials. Play is a springboard for creative activity and is something children do naturally. The strategies of drawing, building, and modeling provide the context for children's oral stories.

Exploring Storyscapes

"Storyscapes" is a term used by Nancy Mellon in her book ***Storytelling and the Art of the Imagination*** (1992) for considering the various settings found in fairy tales. The settings of many of the old tales served a significant function. Forests, dark woods, insurmountable towers, castles, magical lakes, dangerous seas, looming mountains, and much more, provided challenges or solace for the characters. Maybe the hero was sent on a quest that involved crossing a dangerous river, or finding hidden treasure buried in a mountain cave; perhaps the forest afforded shelter and protection to the hero from evil forces.

The following activities are designed to explore different storyscapes with children in order for them to tell their own tales. Children's literature can be the stimulus for the discussions, especially in middle and upper years. Many of the children's responses will no doubt open up new storyscapes that can be discussed and storied.

The idea of storyscapes can be introduced by discussing various settings in different fairy tales, such as Rapunzel's tower, Hansel and Gretel's woods, Cinderella's palace, The Three Billy Goats Gruff's bridge over the river, or the Fisherman and His Wife's sea. Children can explore the different settings and possible scenarios when the familiar setting is changed. Discuss the importance of setting in a story. As an example, discuss how the story *Rapunzel* would change if the setting were a hut in the woods instead of a tower.

Discuss settings in modern fantasies that the children have read, such as ***Tom's Midnight Garden*** (Pearce) with its enchanted garden; ***The Red King*** (Kelleher) and his mountain home; the farmyard of ***Charlotte's Web*** (White); the Diamond Palace of ***The Rescuers*** (Sharp); the river bank from ***The Wind in the Willows*** (Grahame); the 100 Acre Wood from ***Winnie-the-Pooh*** (Milne); or the Rocks of Sydney, Australia around 1873 in ***Playing Beatie Bow*** (Park). If children are unable to offer many suggestions, read short excerpts from different fantasies available at the library.

Selected Significant Settings

Mountains: Mountains appear in many stories. Their existence can be

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central to the plot, as a barrier, a place that holds some secret that is threatening or precious, or as something symbolic, representing something to aspire to or something to be avoided. Ask the children to imagine a huge mountain rising up from a landscape. Have them think about its shape, size, and color. Who lives at the base of the mountain? Why? What secrets does the mountain hold?

Children might like to discuss these ideas in small groups. If it is practical, let them create mountains using sand and water, cardboard, or modeling clay.

Water: Water in all its various forms is another significant part of the storyscapes of many traditional and contemporary tales. Again, through recalling or reading significant excerpts, discuss stories that feature water. The following are suggestions to get started: ***The Bunyip of Berkeley's Creek*** (Wagner), in which Bunyip wonders who his reflection in the creek is; the Greek story of *Narcissus* who falls in love with his own reflection; *Hansel and Gretel*, who ride on a duck's back to get home; Graeme Base's ***The Sign of the Seahorse***; *The Fisherman and His Wife*; Gary Paulsen's ***The Return***, during which a boy takes a river journey; or *Romulus and Remus*, who are thrown into a river as babies.

As with the mountain, have the children imagine a lake, filling in their own details. What shape and color is the lake? What is the landscape like surrounding it? Does the lake have any magical powers?

Children can respond to these questions through drawing. Ask them to show in their drawings what characteristics they have given it, including any symbolic or magical ones.

Towers and Castles: In many fairy tales, towers represent imprisonment (as in *Rapunzel* and *Rumplestiltskin*), while a castle is often the object of success and victory, as in *Cinderella* (who goes to a castle to live happily ever after).

Have the children create a tower with blocks or boxes. Give the tower only one window. Let them decide who or what lives in the tower, how they came there, and what happens to them.

Let the children find a partner and tell stories about the tower. The children can also design a castle in which they'd like to live, then they can tell a story of an adventure at the castle. For example: What would happen if an evil wizard put a spell on the castle and turned it into a shack?

Woods, Forests, Trees: Discuss stories that feature woods, such as *Hansel and Gretel, Little Red Riding Hood,* ***Kenji's Forest*** (Morimoko), or ***Hatchet*** (Paulsen). Discuss ways in which the settings contribute to the plots in each of these stories.

The following is one story that can be used in this discussion. Tell the children they will help you tell a scary story about going on a ghost hunt in the woods. Explain that sound effects in storytelling can make things scarier (just as they often do in movies). Ask the listeners to make a *whooosh* sound whenever they hear the word **wind**; for **leaves**, they should rub their hands together; for **owl**, they should say *whooo, whoooo*; and when they hear **ghost**, they should say *boo-o-o-o-o-o*. Practice the sounds before beginning the story. (Tellers can adapt this exercise to suit their own style and purposes.)

I want to take you on a walk through the woods. Let's stay together. I don't want anyone to get lost. You never know what might happen in the woods at night. Here we go. (Start walking and signal for the children to follow. Stop and face the group.) *Oh, did I tell you that some folks think there are ghosts* (pause) *in these woods? Let's see if we can catch a few. I haven't been on a good ghost* (pause) *hunt in years.*

It's very dark and there's such a cold wind. (Pause, look nervously around, and shiver.) *What's that? Did you hear that noise? LOOK! IT'S A GHOST!*

Let's go around this tree and get a better look at it. (Crouch low and point). *It's moving away! Let's go after it. Tread softly on those leaves.* (Pause.) *You don't want it to hear us. Oh, it's chilly. Just listen to that wind.* (Pause) *Let's stop for a minute.* (Gather the children around you.) *Everybody all right? Okay, let's go on.*

There's a cave up ahead. I wonder what's in there? Do you suppose there are any you-know-whats? (Give evil laugh.)

Walk very quietly. LOOK OUT! GHOSTS! (Scream and run around in circles. Speak fast and in a frightened tone.) *Let's get out of here! Run! Oh, there's that owl* (pause). *The wind* (pause) *is blowing. It's freezing cold. Faster, faster. The leaves* (pause) *are so noisy. Ah, we're nearly there. Home at last.* (Pant, pant) *Well, I wasn't sc-sc-scared. How about you?*

For centuries people have seen trees as being vital to life. They provide food, oxygen, and materials for building shelter. They can also seem frightening to people. They can be a maze in which you get lost. They can harbor deadly animals, appear ghostly in moonlight, or produce sounds when the wind whistles through their branches. Folklore about trees reveals how people hold superstitions about trees and the fruit they bear. Some examples: finding a large, thin seed in an apple is the sign that a letter is imminent; it's good luck to find a worm in the first eating apple of the season; the Japanese believe that bamboo will bring good fortune in the future; if you swallow a cherry stone, a cherry tree will grow inside your stomach; and pine trees moan because they contain imprisoned spirits of all the winds (***Storytelling Folklore Sourcebook***, Livo and Reitz, 1991).

Have the children group in threes and create a shared story from one of these beliefs. Each member must contribute something—narration, dialogue, or sound effects.

Conclusion

Storytelling has an important role to play in teaching and learning. Most learners remember facts better when they are presented in narrative form. Teachers who use storytelling and other forms of imaginative play in their classrooms should give these activities the time and space they deserve. Children and parents need to understand their importance. Storytelling is a powerful outlet for the imagination. **SW**

Kerry Mallan (pictured on cover), a native and resident of Brisbane, Australia, lectures in storytelling and children's literature at the Queensland University of Technology. She is currently studying for her doctorate in the area of children's oral narratives. Her research involves making and analyzing recordings of children's stories. Kerry has published two books, ***Children as Storytellers*** *(PETA/Heinemann) and* ***Laugh Lines: Exploring Humour in Children's Literature*** *(PETA), and will be releasing a third one soon.*

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